

District Approaches to Improving Tennessee's High Priority Schools: *Hamilton County Department of Education*



The Hamilton County Department of Education faces challenges about which school and district officials are well aware – attendance issues, low parental support in some communities, and resources that fall short at times. However, interviews with principals and district personnel indicate a solid focus on student learning. District and school officials in Hamilton County convey a clear sense that they are “all on the same page,” that the district leadership has succeeded in sharing a strong vision of what should be happening in schools every day, and that school leaders and teachers are carrying the vision forward with commitment.

Report Findings:

- The district provides schools with accessible, specific student data reports and teaches school personnel how to understand and use the data to inform their instructional decision-making. The district and schools also use data to identify attendance and discipline problems and target preventive efforts. Attendance continues to be a problem for the district, with almost 35 percent of students missing 10 or more days during the 2005-06 year. The issue has sparked the creation of various alternative learning environments, including the Virtual School, Evening Schools, career academies at all high schools, and the Adult High School.
- National and local funders have expressed a high degree of confidence in Hamilton County Schools, which has been awarded over \$90 million in competitive grants. Principals note that, in particular, the grants have allowed schools to access quality professional development for teachers that otherwise would have been difficult to obtain.
- Principals have the authority to make some budgetary decisions, thus allowing schools more autonomy in allocating resources. Schools are given block grants with great flexibility, but must demonstrate that spending aligns with achievement goals.
- Communication with the community about the district's efforts and successes has been an area of weakness. Communicating clearly with the community is essential to school system accountability and to building a broader commitment to public education.
- Teacher learning and professional development in Hamilton County is developing into a more school-directed, collaborative, daily function.
- The district provides bonuses and incentives to high quality educators working in high poverty schools. Incentives include retention and recruitment bonuses, salary bonuses, team bonuses, and a housing incentive.
- Leadership development for aspiring, new, and experienced leaders supports the district's focus on instruction.

School officials say that the quality of professional development they receive makes the biggest impact on their teachers.

Recommendations for District Leaders:

- HCDE should:
 - Maintain its focus on student learning through improving classroom instruction.
 - Make open communications with all stakeholders a priority.
 - Consider filing a waiver with the U.S. Department of Education to allow the district to provide supplemental education services.